

CHAPTER 4:

SYNOPSIS

Wisconsin's rail system provides a network over which freight and people can be transported efficiently. As such, rail is and will continue to be an important mode of transportation for Wisconsin.

- Freight rail service provides a low cost transportation alternative for the high volume, lower value commodities that are essential to many of Wisconsin's traditional manufacturing industries. Rail provides a low cost energy source (coal) to the state's electric utilities. In the expanding arena of international trade, freight rail movement between Wisconsin, Canada, and Mexico will continue to increase, and transcontinental containerized shipments involving ship/rail/truck intermodal movements are projected as a significant growth area.
- Intercity passenger rail service in Wisconsin provides access to commercial and cultural attractions in Chicago, Minneapolis/St. Paul and other parts of the country. It provides a mobility choice for those traveling in congested areas and for those who cannot, or choose not to, drive or fly.
- Crossing safety measures allow the two modes—roadways and railways—to interact with minimum risk and maximum transportation network efficiency.

Numerous rail issues have an impact on the efficiency of the rail network. These include rail congestion, intermodal facilities, preserving rail corridors and maintenance of publicly owned infrastructure. Another issue, determining the appropriate level of intercity passenger

rail service is currently being studied under the Midwest Regional Rail Initiative. The transportation of hazardous materials, reducing crashes at roadway/railway crossings and trespassing are other issues that affect citizens, communities and businesses. Inefficiencies in the regulatory arena in which private railroads operate are impacting shippers, and possibly, the quality of rail network infrastructure.

There are many opportunities for the state to position itself for the impact of growth in both freight and passenger rail. Several opportunities involve increasing current public sector efforts along with monitoring the rail industry to ensure that Wisconsin business and citizens continue to have a viable alternative for shipping freight and transporting people. An assessment of the range of potential costs to preserve and improve the state's rail infrastructure should be undertaken. As always, maximizing the safety of Wisconsin's citizens and fair and equitable treatment across all transportation modes will be guiding principles along with maximizing public benefits and preserving Wisconsin's environment and quality of life.

Emerging issues such as efforts to reduce the level of mercury emissions from coal-powered energy plants, bans on locomotive horn use, and the implementation of commuter rail services must be closely monitored.

The issues raised in this report and the critical issue of how to fund rail system initiatives will be further examined in Connections 2030.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Canadian National and Canadian Pacific Railway have enough revenue that they would be considered Class 1 railroads if they were U.S. companies.
- ² *Construction and Forecast of Freight Traffic Data for the Wisconsin State Rail Plan 2020*, (2002), Reebie Associates. WisDOT hired the firm of Reebie Associates to forecast commodity movements for the year 2020.
- ³ *Modal Analysis of Wisconsin Freight Traffic Data*, (2002), Wilbur Smith and Associates. Based on freight projections by Wilbur Smith and Associates, 2002. Three million gross tons per year is considered a minimum threshold for maintaining cost-effective rail freight operations in a corridor.
- ⁴ *Freight Transportation for the 21st Century*, (2003), Transportation Research Board Special Report #271.
- ⁵ The *Freight Bottom Line Report*, (2003), American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, draws the conclusion that "...relatively small additional investments in the nation's freight rail system can be leveraged to provide relatively large public benefits."
- ⁶ *Critical Cargo, a Regional Freight Action Agenda*, Business Leaders for Transportation, April 2002
- ⁷ This compares, for example, to a 2020 estimate of 22,000 trucks per day inbound and outbound at the I-94 gateway to SE Wisconsin at Kenosha based on six day per week operations.
- ⁸ *Modal Analysis of Wisconsin Freight Traffic Data*, (2002), Wilbur Smith and Associates.
- ⁹ The 500-mile figure represents the total out and back travel distance likely accomplished by a truck in a single day.
- ¹⁰ RTCs were created before a 1992 change to the Wisconsin Constitution allowed state investment in rail infrastructure. Although no longer legally required, they continue to be used as a mechanism to provide local input and ownership of rail lines.
- ¹¹ Wisconsin Demographic Services Center, 2003
- ¹² *The Governor's Blue Ribbon Task Force on Passenger Rail*, February 2001
- ¹³ *Intercity Passenger Rail Corridors Feasibility Study*, June 2002, Wisconsin Department of Transportation.
- ¹⁴ State agencies record Hazmat incidents using a variety of qualifying criteria. The U.S. DOT Hazardous Materials Information Database is the only source that allows incidents to be sorted by mode.
- ¹⁵ Active crossings are equipped with warning, and occasionally protection devices, that change when a train approaches. Almost 45% of all Wisconsin public roadway/railway crossings fall into this category. Passive crossings are equipped with warning devices that do not change state when a train approaches the intersection. Such devices include cross-bucks, stop signs, yield signs, and pavement markings.
- ¹⁶ WisDOT Bureau of Transportation Safety
- ¹⁷ *U.S. DOT Inspector General's Grade Crossing Safety Audit*—FRA Report RT-199-140—September 1999.
- ¹⁸ FRA Office of Safety Analysis
- ¹⁹ *Draft RR Taxation Study Committee Report and Recommendation*, February 21, 1997.
- ²⁰ *The Governor's Blue Ribbon Task Force on Passenger Rail Service*, February 2001.

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